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UNH Expert: How To Stay Safe During Winter Camping And Hiking

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UNH Expert: How To Stay Safe During Winter Camping And Hiking
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DURHAM, N.H. -- Winter pursuits are challenging, rewarding endeavors when participants are properly prepared, but winter experiences can go horribly wrong in the face of changing weather, inadequate planning and other uncertainties.

Laurie Gullion, coordinator of the Outdoor Education option at the University of New Hampshire, says people who hike and camp in winter need to have previous experience in other seasons as well as in higher, exposed elevations to test their personal preparedness and decision-making. In addition, winter backpackers should:

- Get training from a reputable organization on cold-weather first aid, camping, map and compass, and avalanche awareness.
- Go with a support group of qualified friends.
- Plan on being out overnight, even if it’s a day trip.
- Leave a trip plan with a contact person, including a time when they should contact search and rescue authorities.
- Know how to manage their clothing and gear systems to stay dry and functional.
- Consume enough calories and water to avoid dehydration, a loss of energy, and cold injuries like frostbite.
- Understand the weather to make appropriate and conservative decisions, especially about turning back or dropping quickly below tree line in the face of worsening weather.

Gullion, who has paddled, hiked and climbed in the Canadian and Scandinavian Arctic, says, “Those guidelines are appropriate for any season and every activity, but they are essential for winter experiences.”

People are used to instant communication, but in the backcountry, communication is thwarted by deep valleys, high mountains and a lack of transmission towers. “A cell phone should not only be treated as a last resort but as no option at all, and travelers should be prepared to deal with a variety of emergencies within their own party. People must enter a winter
environment with the mindset and equipment that they will be able to come to their own rescue,” she says.

The UNH Outdoor Education program trains students in progressively more demanding situations to handle cold-weather camping, hiking and ice climbing. Its winter backpacking course, which Gullion teaches, includes an ascent of Mt. Washington. Students must take a 10-day summer backpacking course, and camp and hike in cooler weather before they can enroll in the winter backpacking course.

The ascent to the top of Mt. Washington is contingent upon weather conditions, with high winds, intense cold and poor visibility the factors that contribute to decisions about whether to climb or to turn back. According to Gullion, decision-making is an integral part of the UNH training program -- students learn how to care for themselves, their group, and ultimately their future clients.

“Mt. Washington has some of the most severe weather in the world with a history of deaths from exposure, yet its famous Presidential Traverse is an increasingly popular challenge in winter. People on the eastern side of Mt. Washington often cannot see the prevailing weather approaching from the west,” Gullion says.

“People need to have a fitness level for hiking in snow and wind that allows them to reach the summit and come down without being so overtaxed that they lose the ability to make good decisions. Dying from hypothermia is a very real threat that has killed some winter hikers in the Presidential Range,” she says.